

The Jimmy Carter Presidency



Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, announced his candidacy for president in 1974, just before his term as Governor of Georgia expired. For the next two years, he traveled around the country making speeches and meeting as many people as possible. As a born-again Christian, his core message was one of values: He called for a return to honesty and an elimination of secrecy in government, and repeatedly told voters, "I'll never tell a lie."

At a time when Americans were disillusioned with the executive branch of government in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Carter managed to build a constituency by marketing himself as an outsider to Washington politics. He won the Democratic nomination in July 1976 and chose **Senator Walter F. Mondale of Minnesota** as his running mate. In the general election, Carter faced Republican incumbent Gerald R. Ford, who had succeeded to the presidency after Richard Nixon's resignation. In November, Carter won a **narrow victory**, capturing 51 percent of the popular vote and 297 electoral votes (compared with Ford's 240).

As president, Carter sought to portray himself as a man of the people, dressing informally and adopting a folksy speaking style. He introduced a number of ambitious programs for social and economic reform, and included a relatively large number of women and minorities in his cabinet. Despite Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, Congress blocked Carter's proposal for welfare reform, as well as his proposal for a long-range energy program, a central focus of his administration. This difficult relationship with Congress meant that Carter was unable to convert his plans into legislation, despite his initial popularity.

Foreign Policy

In 1977, Carter brokered two U.S. treaties with Panama which were in response to protests over the rights of the Panama Canal. His negotiations planned to turn over the Canal and the U.S. Canal Zone to the Panamanian government. The treaties were a twenty-year plan stating that the United States retained the rights to intervene in the area to keep the Canal as a neutral international waterway.

The Middle East

In 1978, Jimmy Carter presided over a tough round of meetings between **Egypt's President Anwar el-Sadat and Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin** at Camp David. The resulting **Camp David Accords** ended the state of war between the two nations that had existed since Israel was founded in 1948. In addition, the Accords gave Israel official recognition as well as access through the Suez Canal. In return, Israel agreed to evacuate certain areas of the Sinai Peninsula that they took in the 1973 Middle East War. The final stage was that both Egypt and Israel promised to start negotiations regarding self-determination for the Palestinian refugees in Israel.



In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Carter withdrew the **SALT II Treaty** from the Senate, cut the U.S. sales of grain to the Soviets, and ordered a boycott of the **1980 Olympics** in Moscow. The Soviet leaders ignored all protest actions. The United States sent aid to Afghan rebels in their mountain strongholds. The Soviets withdrew from the region in 1989 and a civil war continued until the 1990's. Many people said that Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

Carter also reopened diplomatic relations between the United States and China while breaking ties with Taiwan.

After the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan, Carter then signed a bilateral strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT II) with the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

Iran Hostage Crisis

In November 1979, a mob of Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took over fifty diplomatic staff hostages as a protest against the arrival in the United States of the deposed Iranian shah, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, in order to receive medical treatment. The students had the support of Iran's revolutionary government, led by **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini**. The country changed its name to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Carter stood firm in the tense standoff that followed, but his failure to free the hostages during the Iran hostage crisis led his government to be perceived as inept and inefficient. Carter's popularity at home declined rapidly. Daily newscasts showed thousands of Iranians outside the embassy chanting "Death to Carter – Death to America." This perception increased after the failure of a secret U.S. military mission in April 1980 and the subsequent resignation of Carter's Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance.



Human Rights

President Jimmy Carter was always an outspoken critic of human rights violations. He continually deemed improper and inhumane treatment of political prisoners in Cuba, South Africa under Apartheid, Uganda and the U.S.S.R. Even as the United States pointed out violations, the Soviets continued to restrict freedom of speech and the press. The Soviet Union also continued to block attempts by those who wanted to leave the country, especially Russian Jews.

Domestic Policies

Throughout his presidency, Carter struggled to combat the nation's economic woes, including high unemployment, rising inflation and the effects of an energy crisis that began in the early 1970s. Though he claimed an increase of 8 million jobs and a reduction in the budget deficit by the end of his term, many business leaders as well as the public blamed Carter for the nation's continuing struggles, saying he did not have a coherent or effective policy to address them. In July 1979, Carter called a special summit with national leaders at Camp David. His televised speech after the meeting diagnosed a "crisis of confidence" occurring in the country, a mood that he later referred to as a "national malaise."

(Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/jimmy-carter>)

Jimmy Carter had an engineering degree and background from the Georgia Institute of Technology and while serving in the United States Navy where it was believed her was a nuclear engineer on the nuclear-powered submarines. This prior knowledge would help him as President on several occasions.

In the late 1970's, Carter encouraged research on **wind and solar power systems** along with the development of **synthetic fuels** as a result of the Middle East Oil Crisis. To save energy, he asked Congress to mandate cutbacks on power consumption and created a cabinet-level **Department of Energy** to plan strategies for the future.

Jimmy Carter wanted to continue the space program but due to government deficits and the lack of public interest, he was forced to cut back on spending for these programs. He did however, allow the launch of the **Skylab Space Station** that orbited the earth for several years allowing astronauts to complete scientific research.

Environmental Concerns

In 1977, homes built near a chemical dump called **Love Canal** near Niagara Falls had to be abandoned. Residents had become severely ill and local children were being born with serious birth defects. The illegal dumping by major corporations into the local water areas raised public awareness about the problem of toxic waste. Carter had congress respond by creating a "**super fund**" of several billion dollars to be used by the **EPA (Environmental Protection Agency)** to clean up dangerous sites.

Three-Mile Island was a nuclear power station outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In 1979, an incident took place causing an overloading of the nuclear generators. A fear of a "**melt-down**" and a release of radioactive material increased public awareness towards nuclear power. Carter actually visited the site during the cooling-down process to better understand the situation and also to calm the local community. This incident led to many anti-nuclear demonstrations around the nation.



The **Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)** tightened safety procedures and some nuclear power plants were denied operating licenses, such as the Shoreham facility on the north shore of Long Island.

Other Important Acts passed by Congress during the Carter Administration

The **1975 Voting Rights Act** required bilingual ballots in districts with large, non-English speaking voters.

The **Bilingual Education Act** mandated public schools teach students in their native language while learning English.

The **Rehabilitation Act of 1973** ended discrimination in jobs, education, and housing.

In 1975, Congress required **free public education for all physically and mentally disabled students**. Many communities now created special vehicle parking facilities and ramps for the disabled.

During Jimmy Carter's Presidency, two attempts to balance the Federal Budget failed. The nation's debt increased rapidly to **over 100 billion dollars**. Some economists blamed the deficit on the high rate of inflation during this decade. Others felt that these budget shortfalls would eventually lead to an economic collapse of the United States. Because of a combination of many factors, Carter's popularity rating fell drastically.

**Presidential Approval Ratings
President Jimmy Carter
1977 to 1981**

January 1977 – 63%
January 1978 – 50%
January 1979 – 46%
January 1980 – 52%
January 1981 – 32%

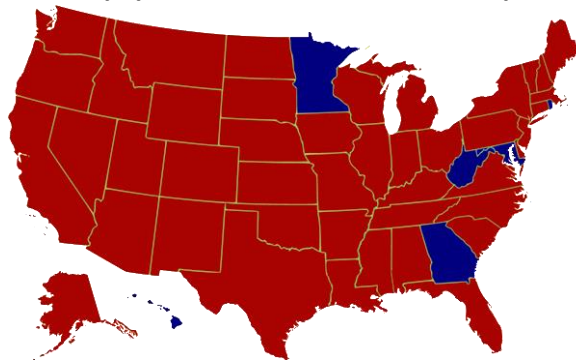
Source: Gallup Poll

For the **Election of 1980**, the Republican Party, devastated earlier by Watergate, nominated the **conservative Governor of California, Ronald Reagan**. He promised to reduce the federal bureaucracy and **make America strong again**.

Reagan took eight million more popular votes than Carter and sept the Electoral Vote 489 to 49.



Carter



Reagan

In Iran, a war with Iraq had started and the Iranians needed money for weapons. Facing increased international criticism, they released the U.S. hostages on the same day that Ronald Reagan took office (January 20, 1981). In return, the United States released frozen Iranian bank accounts in America. The hostages were welcomed home with dramatic displays of American patriotism.